

Guide dogs, Italian style.

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guide dogs, ITALIAN STYLE

Until recently, many of Italy's blind could never hope to see through a dog's eyes. Now, Lions are working to provide that precious gift.

THERE ARE 60,000 BLIND PEOPLE IN ITALY. Of these, experts say, one-fifth (12,000) have the health, sense of balance and direction and personality to use a guide dog as a tool for independent travel, which is vital to their total adjustment. Many of these 12,000 will someday own a guide dog, thanks to a unique Italian program sponsored by Lions.

The current demand for guide dogs in Italy has not reached its potential. There are now only 400 in the country and several years ago, the number of guide trainees didn't even reach the 50 a year necessary for renewal of the existing group.



At G.M. Maselli guide dog school, director Walter Hantke on far right discusses his training method with visitor Claude De Vorss, then International President travelling in Italy.

But as each new owner of a guide dog walks into a fuller, more rewarding social and working life, news of his good fortune travels fast and strengthens the desire of more and more blind Italians for such help.

Luckily, the Lions of Italy recently took it upon themselves to meet the present and future requests of these people by way of the Lions Guide Dog Service. The Service was established by three Milan clubs—Milano Host, Alto Milanese and Milano Visconteo—and shortly thereafter the clubs of District 108-I assumed patronage of it.

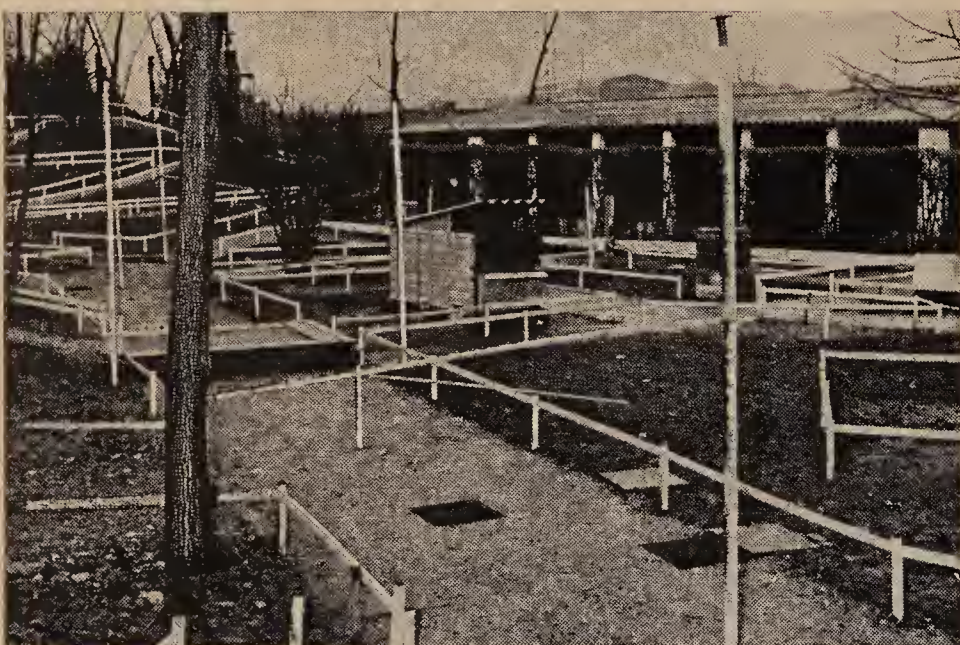
At first the Service imported guide dogs from West German schools, but now it has two training schools of its own. The smaller of the two, sponsored by the Sondrio club, is located in the Valtellina region and is managed by a blind war veteran who trains 15 dogs a year. The G. M. Maselli School in Milan trains 75 a year.

The Milan School was named in memory of Lion G. M. Maselli, first elected president of the Service. Before becoming president, in spite of his old age, Maselli served as Technical Director of the Sight Conservation and Work for the Blind Committee of the Milan Host club. He died a year after helping to establish the Milan School.

Besides sheer determination on the part of Milan Lions, the school was born out of a coincidence: the availability of both a training ground

Shown below is a portion of wandering training paths of the Maselli school. Kennels are behind the rear hedge.





Top: A German Shepherd "student" leads an assistant trainer up stairs. Before the animal graduates from the Maselli school, it will avoid all obstacles of the course such as the open sewers shown in next picture. Bottom: Other student dogs await their lessons on the training paths.



and dog trainer Walter Hantke, past director of the Vienna Military School.

A 4,000 square-meter plot, formerly used to train watch and hunting dogs, had been taken over by the Milan community for city planning reasons. However, the lot was not to be used for some years and the Service asked for and was granted its use. Located on the outskirts of the city, the property contained a garden with many tree-lined paths, kennels, an apartment, office, animal clinic, garage and storerooms.

After it was cleaned and repaired by Milan Lions, trainer Hantke moved to the school and with the help of the Lions began to install training devices. When he was finished, the school's wandering paths were scattered with training obstacles—iron poles holding chest-high plastic appendages, high and low hanging wire ditches and curbs, open man holes, steps and stairs and even a bridge across a pond.

When the dogs arrive at the school they are taught first to come, sit, lie down and rest. Then they learn to lead the blind safely about the dangerous areas of the paths. During this time the dogs are exposed to such distractions as cats, pigs, chickens, and other domestic animals which they must become acquainted with and learn to tolerate. And finally the dogs go on sorties in Milan's dense city traffic to complete their instruction.

Hantke studies the habits and temperament of each dog for the duration of the training period so that he can select the dog most suited to the individual needs of each blind recipient. When the selection is made, the two learn to work together. The blind person feeds, exercises, groom and eventually wins the dog from the trainer.

At the present, Hantke has three student instructors assisting him and will soon have more. They will be used by the Service to open a new school in Southern Italy and to expand operations at the small Sondrio School.

The Governor of District 108-I is Honorary President of the Service. Holding that office now is Lion Patrone Cesare, of Genova. Among the elected Directors are a lawyer, veterinarian and ophthalmologist.

The Service depends on all 255 Italian Lions clubs for funds and guide dog candidates (who are usually 13 to 18 months old and female). The clubs also help to contact the blind who want guide dogs; conduct tests necessary to ascertain a dog's aptitude for training; and assist in training as to the animal's health as well as the problems of its master.

It is the hope of the Italian Lions that 12,000 capable blind of their country will someday request a better life via guide dogs. If the Lions' enthusiastic preparation is any indication, that day is not far off.

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